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## **Trailer park residents forced to find new homes**

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Residents of the North Park Trailer Court learned last week that they have until June 1 to clear out of the 32-unit development across Sixth Avenue North from North Park.

Some of them are angry, saying they don't have enough time to find a decent place to live in Billings' tight rental market.

"Nobody cares. That's the bottom line," said Gary Ulstad, who has lived in the park for more than six years. "They don't care because we're trailer trash."

The eviction notices were delivered May 1 by representatives of BP Asset Management, which manages the park for Turnbull ITC. The letters said Turnbull "has committed to a sale of the property. As part of our due diligence before the closing of the sale, we are required to remove all mobile homes currently in place on the property and have all tenants moved from the premises."

Developer Aaron Sparboe confirmed that he is in the process of buying the property from Turnbull, but he can't say yet what kind of development is being considered for the property.

"At some point, something is going to happen with the property. We're just not there yet," he said.

The park is on the south side of Sixth Avenue North between north 19th and 20th streets, a block east of where the Salvation Army is proposing to build a youth homeless shelter.

Rick Dorn, the managing partner of Turnbull ITC, said his company bought the trailer park last September, with plans to start upgrading the 32 trailers, all of them rental units.

"We weren't looking at selling," he said. "It just kind of came upon us."

He said about a third of the people who were living in the park have already been relocated to other properties owned by Turnbull, including another trailer park and a 20-unit apartment building. Efforts will be made to find new housing for other residents, he said.

What upset some residents is that although rumors of a sale were circulating for months, they kept receiving assurances that all was well.

"Right up to the very day they gave eviction notices, they told everybody, don't worry, it's just rumors. They wanted to get every last dollar they could out of poor people," Ulstad

said.

Randy Groover has lived in the park for two years, paying \$600 for a dilapidated one-bedroom trailer he shares with his wife, two stepchildren and three grandchildren. He said he knew something was up in February, when he paid his rent and tried to renew his one-year lease. BP Asset Management wouldn't allow him to renew, or even to sign a one-month lease, he said.

Mike Eastman, owner of the management company, said he couldn't tell tenants anything because he knew nothing of the owner's plans.

"I'm not the owner; I'm the property manager," he said. "The owner didn't tell me anything."

Turnbull backed up Eastman's account. If tenants asked about the status of the property, he said, "what they were told was that nothing was solid. That was a true statement."

Another point of contention is that the eviction notices were accompanied by a letter explaining how residents should clean up their trailers if they want to get their damage deposits back. Groover said trailers like his, which are very old and in decrepit condition, probably couldn't be resold anyway.

"My trailer, if you hooked up to it and tried to take off, you wouldn't get two feet before it fell apart. I guarantee it," he said.

There are holes in the floor, the skirting is crumbling away and the bathroom sink doesn't work. Most of his windows, which he asked to have replaced shortly after he moved in, he said, were simply covered over with sheet metal. Pointing to the covered-over windows on the west side of his trailer, he said, "There's my fire exits."

Dorn acknowledged that 10 or so of the trailers might have to be disposed of, but the other ones can be renovated and sold or reused.

"They can't all be saved," he said. "We obviously are going to disassemble some of those units." If a trailer is going to be junked, he said, it would make sense to give the tenant his or her damage deposit back without requiring that the trailer be cleaned.

"We're going to try to be reasonable about all that, on a case-by-case basis," he said.

As for the condition of some of the trailers, Eastman, the property manager, said, "Some of the people down there don't treat their trailers very well. I can't afford to fix a lot of the things they break."

Carl Visser, chief executive officer of the District 7 Human Resource Development Council, said all of the units in the North Park Trailer Park were built before 1976 and ideally would not be resold. Pre-1976 trailers have aluminum wiring and are 65 percent

more likely to catch fire than newer models, he said.

Visser said the HRDC had hopes of buying the trailer park a couple of years ago, when the North Park Task Force asked what could be done about the down-at-the-heels area. Visser said the HRDC wanted to buy the park and slowly move the residents into better housing, disposing of the trailers as they were vacated. But the asking price a year and a half ago was about \$800,000, too much for the agency.

The closing of the park, he said, "is another indication of what's happening to us on the low-income end of the housing market."

Casa Village, a large mobile home park on the West End, is up for sale, he said, and there has been talk of closing the Southgate Village Trailer Park. That park is located on King Avenue East near where Cabela's is proposing to build a store, creating interest among other retailers.

"I don't know where all these people are supposed to go," Visser said, especially since the city of Billings has a moratorium on the creation of any new trailer parks inside city limits. Most of the residents can't afford anything but another mobile home, he said.

"These are the folks that Cabela's is going to be hiring for 10 or 12 dollars an hour," Visser said.